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FIG. 1. THE SENECA WAMPUM-BELT

THE WAMPUM-RECORDS OF THE IROQUOIS

BY HARRIET MAXWELL CONVERSE

Illustrated from photographs of historical wampum-belts and wampum-strings.

WAMPUM existed among the Indians of the eastern United States, for two very distinct purposes: as money, arising from its earlier use in ornament; and as a symbol of ideas, conveying messages, registering events and recording the past, according to an established system of significance. It is to be noted, however, that this was almost entirely a public usage—a method of communication between the governments of tribes as to events of public interest, and a means of preserving agreements and decisions, and especially such as related to peace or war. “By the wampum!” was the historic oath of the Iroquois Indian. It is

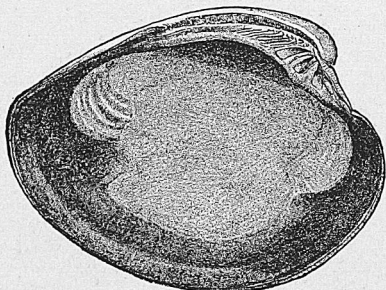


FIG. 2. THE QUAHAUG

in this latter aspect that the writer proposes to consider it, with the assistance of accurate pictures of several strings and belts of wampum that have played an important part in treaty-obligations among the Indians of the last and previous centuries, and between them and the white men with whom they made war and peace.

Tradition says that Hiawatha strung small fresh-water shells together, as a means of recording the laws of that confederacy of five Iroquois tribes—Mohawks



FIG. 3. THE CONCH

Oneidas, Cayugas, Onondagas and Senecas—which he founded. Hiawatha's fragile shells soon crumbled and were replaced by strings and plaits of solid beads carved from shells bought of the Long Island Indians in exchange for corn; and these beads are likely to outlast the confederacy itself, inasmuch as, of the five original “nations,” only two yet hold the tribal law—the Tonawanda Senecas, and the Onondagas. To the latter was assigned the honor of “keeping” the wam-

pum; and, among the feeble remnant of these same Onondagas remaining in Canada, near Niagara Falls, these ancestral legal archives are yet reverently held and interpreted. The purple wampum, taken from the dark border and centre-spot of the quahaug or hard-clam (*Venus mercenaria*, fig. 2) and the white, cut from the column of the spire of the conch



FIG 4

or winkle shell (*Fu'gur carica*, figs. 3, 5), were ground and drilled into beads about a quarter of an inch long, and then formed into strings or woven into ideographic "belts." Figures 5 and 7 explain sufficiently the process of bead-making.

The strings served as messages and symbols of various import, and take a secondary place in comparison with the belts, which recorded laws and treaties, and have the value of national archives. Their general shape appears from the accompanying illustrations, and they are composed wholly of shell-beads woven together upon threads of vegetable fibre or of sinew, and united by buckskin. Both sides are thus alike. Their designs are symbolic not only, but each bead is a reminder of an item to be remembered by the persons whose business it is to preserve this knowledge, called "readers of the wampum" (fig. 6). One of these officers, on any occasion of ceremony to which the belt applied, will recite the record aloud, passing each bead through his fingers like a rosary and repeating the facts at a

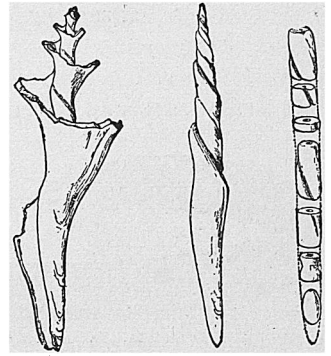


FIG. 5. PROCESS OF MAKING WHITE WAMPUM



FIG. 6. AN ANCIENT WAMPUM-READING (AFTER LAFITAU)

length wearisome to listen to by anyone not vitally interested in the proceedings. A "condolence" wampum-reading frequently consumes an entire day in rehearsing its ancient liturgy.

In the past no treaty was considered valid unless ratified by the wampum, no act complete without an exchange of belts, and this rule held among the Indians themselves, as well as in their

dealings with European powers. All national belts represented governmental transactions. The wampum-strings were merely promises or an exchange of notices, serving as the "word held" until the transaction was completed.

The Iroquois have appointed me custodian (since my adoption into the tribe, and election by the Onondagas to the honor of a chieftainship under the title *Ya-ie-wa-no*) of seven of the original national wampum-belts, three of which, illustrated herewith (figs. 1, 8, 11), have been presented and interpreted to me. A brief explanation of these may be acceptable. All are to be read from left to right.

The Seneca belt (fig. 1) begins with the dark square or "canton" of the Senecas. The eight purple diamonds

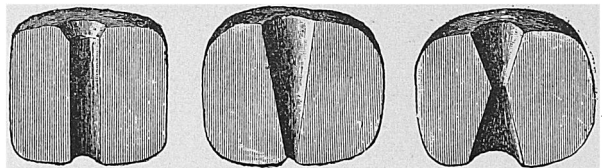


FIG. 7. METHOD OF BORING BEADS.

contain the tribal sachems—Wolf, Bear, Beaver, Turtle, Heron, Snipe, Hawk, Deer, united by twos, significant of the tribal brothers who organized the original League, as is proven by the white or “harmony” beads that surround them. Figure 8 is a hereditary, or tribal, nation-

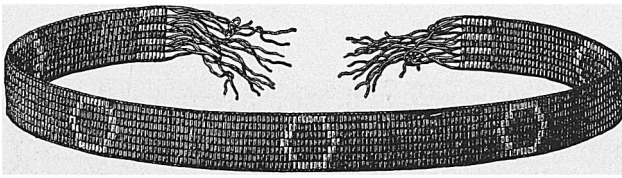


FIG. 8. AN INSTALLATION-BELT

belt, used only in the installation of a sachem, who is a hereditary councillor of the League, the fine white six-sided

signs equalizing the tribal honor of sachemship. Each cross on the fragmentary Mohawk national belt (fig. 9) represents a sachem with up-lifted arms; but this belt, useless after the disruption of the League, has been a storehouse for supplying the rare beads required for new message-strings and other official notices.



FIG. 9

This brings us to the ancient “League-belt” (fig. 11)—a document having much the same value and relation to the Iroquois League as our Declaration of Independence has to the American Union, inasmuch as it records the organization of the confederacy. This belt is forty-six inches long by two and a half inches wide. Reading it from left to right, the plain portion signifies the Mohawk people, to whom was assigned the protection of the eastern end of the League. The diamond-figure, outlined by white, represents the council-fire “shield,” or the twenty-six Mohawk guardians of the eastern door, entering the council-house, symbolized by the five white lines. The east and west sides (the outer short lines) are the seats of the Mohawks and Senecas, the north and south (the two longer inner lines) are assigned to the Cayugas and Oneidas, and the centre to the Onondagas—the lawmakers. From this group the long white peace-path, again protected by the ten Cayuga sachems, leads to the great defence-gate or “western door” (Niagara) allotted to the warriorship of the Senecas, in front of which the eight Seneca tribal sachems, or “watch-keepers” are always guarding the people.

The fine belt shown in figure 12 regulated the terms of a national “warning” to the League when the nine tribes of the Mohawks—as adherents of the British crown—seceded from the confederacy and, uniting with Sir William Johnson, became, forever, “foreigners” to the brotherhood of the ancient confederacy.

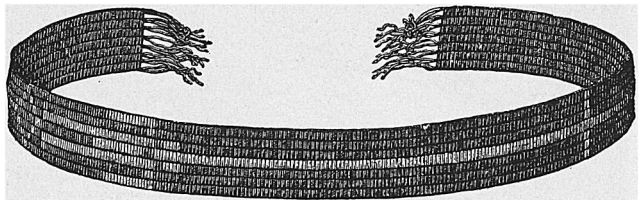


FIG. 11. THE ORIGINAL LEAGUE-BELT

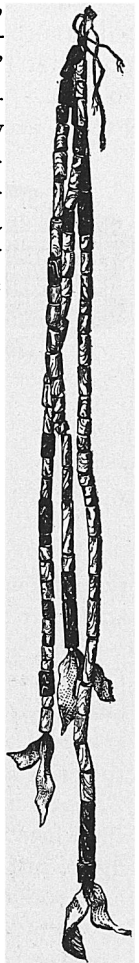


FIG. 10

The "George Washington belt" (fig. 13) is that which confirmed the treaty with the Iroquois at the termination of the Revolutionary war, and which has been preserved by the Onondagas in faith that Washington's word would yet be restored to them. Woven into the story of this belt, where white men and Indians clasp hands, are promises that were never fulfilled, treaties that were broken, and

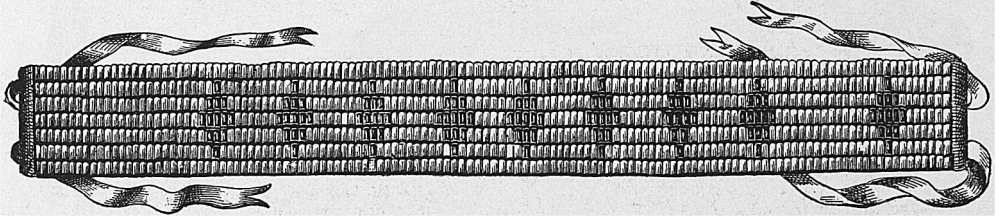


FIG. 12. THE BELT NOTING THE SECESSION OF THE MOHAWKS

"braces" that have crumbled into the dead past of the once powerful Hodonosaunee. Into this historical treasure more than ten thousand beads are interwoven, and it is one of the finest specimens in existence.

The "great belt" of the Onondagas (fig. 15) typifies and records the union of the Five Nations centered in the one "heart" of fraternal sympathy and protection. The ten heads at the base of the heart represent the five selected sachems, and their sub-sachems, of each nation, who were special officers in the council.

The William Penn belt (fig. 17) is believed to be the genuine belt given by the Delawares at the Shackamaxon treaty in 1682, and is preserved among the archives of Pennsylvania. In it will be noticed three diagonal strands of purple and white "braces," emblems of strength by union; the middle one remains broken, the special compact thereof being unfulfilled, or "held open" for future completion. The two men clasping hands symbolize the peace-promise between the red man and the white one. It is interesting, by the way, to compare the conventional human figure in these belts with certain very similar figures of entirely different origin, as for instance in the basket-decoration of the Pacific coast (figs. 16, 18).

Strings of wampum (figs. 4, 10) were commonly used as messages,—most frequently summoning officials to attend a civil council. A string of white beads

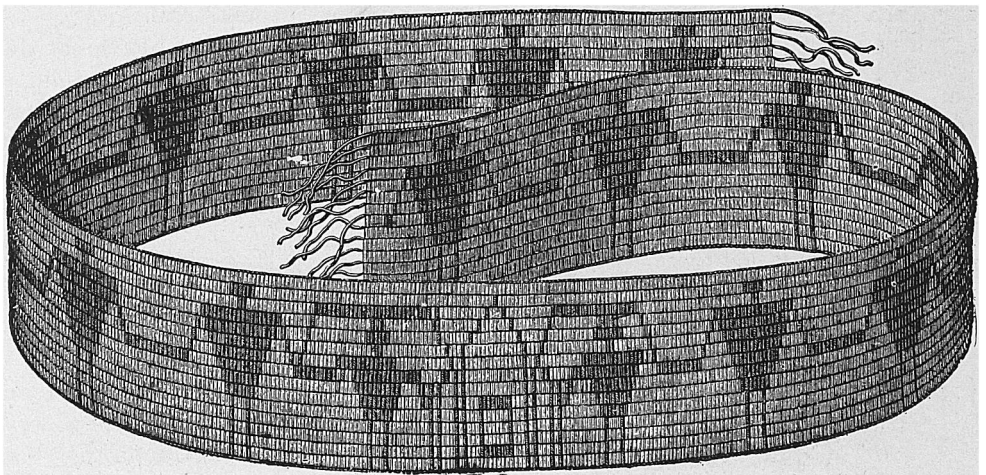


FIG. 13. THE "GEORGE WASHINGTON BELT"

alone was universally recognized as an emblem of peace, and served its bearer as a flag of truce or safe-conduct in time of war; even the prisoner tied to the stake must be released to the person who threw a string of white wampum around his neck. When tipped with a red feather such a string became a formal request for an

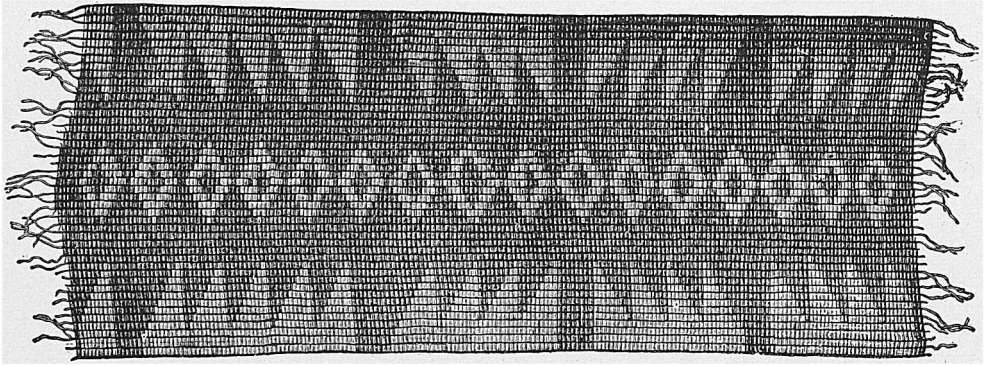


FIG. 14. AN ONONDAGA BELT (45 ROWS, OF 240 BEADS EACH)

armistice, and the combatant who kept it bound himself thereby to suspend hostilities until a joint council could be held. I have in my possession one of these ancient peace-strings, which consists of twenty-six white beads to which is attached a hickory tally-stick having fourteen notches. This, the Indians tell me, was a national truce-message, the notched stick denoting the number of days the runner who bore it consumed upon his errand. For long distances relays of runners were provided, who continued the hurrying journey until the enemy was reached. By the number of notches the days were counted, and the "holding" of the truce decided; the notches were doubled on the return. The runners, who were not permitted to rest a moment, even for food, ate on the full run powdered parched corn carried in a pouch suspended around their necks. If the messenger conveyed a string of the black wampum, painted in red dots, it threatened war; if he were intrusted with black beads, covered with white clay, he bore notice of the death of a chief. Three strings arranged as in figure 10 informed the public of the name of a new chief. Five strings a foot long, of black and white alternating, constituted a petition for forgiveness in case of murder, and were sent to the relatives of a

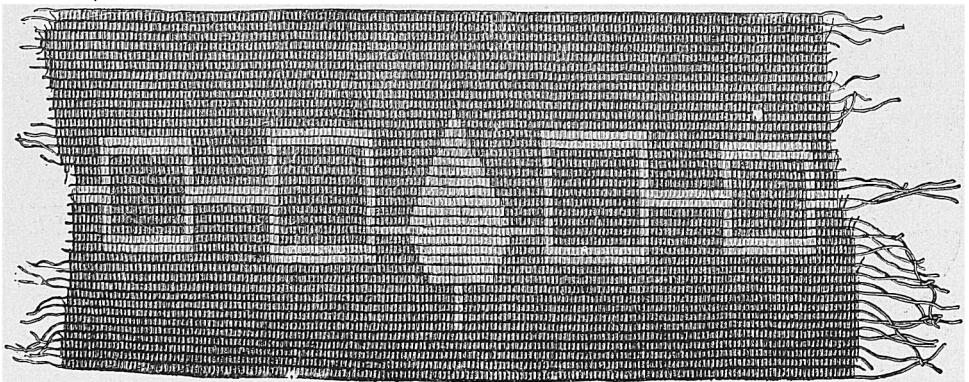


FIG. 13. THE "GREAT BELT" OF THE ONONDAGAS

murdered man, upon whom it was incumbent to revenge his death unless given satisfaction. If they "held" the wampum it implied forgiveness for the "blood lost"; if, on the contrary, they returned it, vengeance was inevitable, and the victim willingly surrendered himself to his fate—death.

Lewis H. Morgan writes that "six strings was the value of a life, or the quantity sent in condonation, for the wampum was rather sent as a regretful confession of the crime, with a petition for forgiveness, than as the actual price of blood." In fact no confession was considered sincere unless accompanied by white wampum; and therein lies the significance of its use in the white-dog ceremony, where the sins of the whole people were confessed and expiated under an idea similar to that which led the ancient Jews to send the scape-goat into the wilderness.

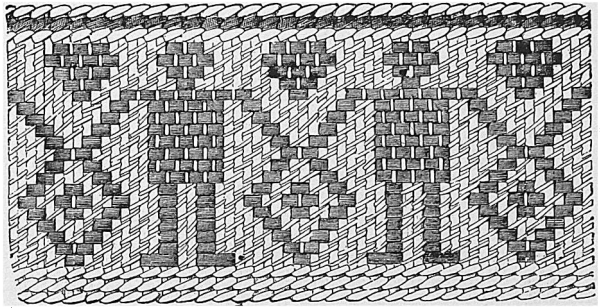


FIG. 16. FIGURES FROM AN ANCIENT PERUVIAN BASKET

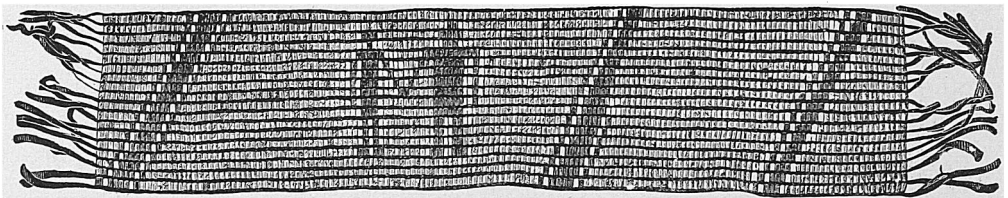


FIG. 17 THE PENN BELT: TREATY WITH THE DELAWARES, 1682

In its symbolic uses, the wampum, as the emblem of purity and faith, was hung around the neck of the dog at the annual sacrificial rite, and even now, although it has become so rare, strings of it go to the ashes with his body wherever this religious ceremony is continued. When three purple beads were conveyed to a sister-nation it was recognized as a "summons" to the "raising" of a chief, who would "lift up the horns" of a deceased predecessor. Such a string as that shown in figure 10 tells the name of a new chief to the initiated.

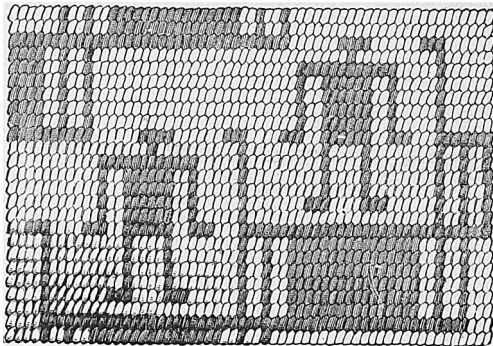


FIG. 18. FROM A CALIFORNIA INDIAN BASKET

At a government council each nation had its representative strings which were laid on a board before the "reader" in the form of a circle—the symbol of union—and "talked into" before a council could be opened or closed. The delegates to a council bore these strings as credentials, and presented them as a part of the ceremonies of organization. Each tribe had its own way of arranging or stringing the beads, an example of which—the proper string of the Mohawks, is shown in figure 4.